

VZCZCXRO8104  
RR RUEHAG RUEHDF RUEHLZ  
DE RUEHFT #1288 0551600  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
R 241600Z FEB 06  
FM AMCONSUL FRANKFURT  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 2030  
INFO RUCNFRG/FRG COLLECTIVE

UNCLAS FRANKFURT 001288

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [GM](#)  
SUBJECT: Hesse Local Election Update

REF: a) 2005 Frankfurt 8530, b) 2005 Frankfurt 2147

Sensitive but unclassified; not for internet distribution.

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: On March 26, Hesse will hold state-wide communal (local) elections in the most important test this year for Minister-President Roland Koch (CDU/Christian Democrats). The SPD/Social Democratic Party (which holds the most mayoral and local assembly seats in the state) is hoping to build on recent by-election victories. Observers say small parties are most likely to post gains. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Political parties are gearing up for communal elections across Hesse in the most important electoral test for the government of Minister-President Koch prior to state elections in 12008. The CDU lost key mayoral and county elections in 2004 and 2005 (in the mid-sized cities of Kassel, Marburg, Darmstadt, Hanau, Ruesselsheim, and Offenbach) -- while winning only two (Wiesbaden and Bad Homburg) -- but Koch remains the state's best-known politician and (as supporters and critics agree) "plays in a league of his own." CDU insiders hope to gain from the popularity of new chancellor Angela Merkel. Hesse CDU General Secretary Michael Boddenberg told a consulate representative that

SIPDIS

state politics will play a relatively small role in the campaign -- except where the state has a say over controversial local projects such as the expansion of Frankfurt Airport and the privatization of university clinics in Marburg und Giessen (Boddenberg doesn't expect those controversies to damage the CDU). Conservatives hope to win as many CDU-FDP/Free Democratic local majorities as possible and will campaign against the prospect of "Red-Red-Green" local governments (i.e., SPD, Greens, and Left Party) in the expectation that Hesse voters will react negatively to a left-wing constellation.

13. (SBU) The SPD is the strongest party at the local level, with twice as many mayors as the CDU and controlling a majority of county and city councils in the state. SPD State Chair Andrea Ypsilanti told us privately that her party's goal is to poll in first place across the state, particularly in the three largest cities of Frankfurt, Wiesbaden, and Kassel (where the SPD is now in government with the CDU in various coalitions). Ypsilanti said she would make the election a referendum on Koch's record, particularly concerning education and the state's growing debt. Crumbling school buildings are a visible problem across the state (a reflection of poor local finances), which the opposition will try to pin on state education policy and growing debt. For the SPD, a weak showing would have a direct impact on the choice of standard-bearer against Minister-President Koch. Ypsilanti told us privately that she does not currently intend to run against Koch in 2008, indicating that the SPD may embrace a new candidate such as popular former Offenbach Lord Mayor Gerhard Grandke.

14. (SBU) Smaller parties are convinced they will gain ground in the election. At the FDP campaign convention in November, delegates glowed with optimism and set a goal of boosting the

number of FDP local officials by 25 percent. In Frankfurt, the FDP is keeping its distance from the CDU, betting that an independent profile will score better with voters. Another projected winner is the Left Party (Linkspartei/WASG-PDS), which hopes to double its seats in Frankfurt and statewide. The Greens, who did poorly in 2000, are convinced they can capture up to 20% of the vote in Frankfurt and become indispensable to a ruling coalition there.

15. (SBU) COMMENT: The SPD and smaller opposition parties hope to make the mid-term election a vote of no-confidence against Koch's CDU administration. Prospects are uncertain. The state government and political parties keep their opinion polls confidential (no poll has been released since 2003). The CDU's

SIPDIS

poor showing in by-elections and in September 2005 national elections (where it trailed the SPD in Hesse) imply that Koch has an uphill battle. With a largely negative campaign, observers concur that those most likely to gain are the FDP and the Left Party -- untarnished by current or recent participation in government. END COMMENT.

16. (U) This cable was coordinated with Embassy Berlin.

PASI